Climate Change Reading List: Books for the Curious & Concerned

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This week marks Climate Week NYC, the annual New York City September tradition - synchronized with the UN General Assembly but typically led by the business and non-governmental community - devoted to all things climate change. The beehive of activity presents opportunities, both live and virtual, to learn about the fundamentals as well as the cutting edge of climate change. But for those looking for a deeper dive than a panel webinar or a keynote address, here is a curated reading list of some of the best books out there to get smart on climate: from fantasy to non-fiction, from technology and science to the human experience. And while things can get technical and abstract, no advanced training is required. On the contrary, this list is geared precisely at the concerned and curious amateur looking to grapple with the nuances of this vital but devilishly complex issue.

The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming, by David Wallace-Wells

We hear so much about 1.5?C or 2?C warming above preindustrial levels - the UN climate convention's Paris Agreement targets formally adopted in 2015 - but typically understand so little about what warming will actually do to our planet and society. This book, with the bracing clarity of an ice bath, unpacks the full scope of unraveling ecosystems and shattering civilization that may - or, in many cases, almost certainly will - befall humankind. Writing impeccable research in almost lyrical prose, Wallace-Wells walks through a litany of climate-infused catastrophes that reads something like the Ten Plagues, but more terrifying. He deconstructs counter-arguments (perhaps coping strategies) of techno-optimism and economic growth messianism. A must-read for anyone who suspects that a few degrees of warming won't really be so bad. Right? May require a stiff drink after the first few chapters.

Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming, ed. Paul Hawken

Are the causes of climate change and the attendant solutions to replace them too dizzyingly numerous and complex for you to grasp? You're not alone. Because sources of greenhouse gas emissions are so diverse and universal across the broad scope of human activity, decarbonizing our economy and society requires rethinking how we extract, make, ship, consume and dispose of things, from top to bottom. Rather than crawling into the fetal position, visit this book - or the constantly improving and updating Project Drawdown repository - to explore the multitude of planet-saving, emissions-reducing technologies and how to deploy them to whip global warming. Think of this book as the chalkboard in the locker room where the game-winning plays are drawn up in X's and O's.

The Resisters, by Gish Jen

Who knew dystopian climate fiction could be so funny and disarming? Jen weaves the story of a high-school girl preternaturally talented at baseball into a future American society, "AutoAmerica", ravaged by sea level rise, extreme social stratification, creeping authoritarianism and advanced social decay. With delicious irony and pathos, Jen breezily narrates from the worm's eye perspective of a "normal" family quotidian life in a sort of fun-house mirror future version of contemporary society. AutoAmerica is littered with vaguely goofy and Orwellian yet oddly familiar technologies such as SpritzGrams, HouseBots, GenetImprovements, lurking public safety Super Enforcers and climate coping solutions such as QuikDams. Most poignantly, the social dynamics, meritocratic rat race, sports

competition and fear of failure are universal and timeless. Above all, Jen succeeds at situating real people in an imagined world of climate and social chaos, tweezing apart the impacts without getting bogged down in despair or nihilism. Read this book to experience what the climate-cracked society of the future could feel like without reaching full Greek tragedy on the emotional Richter scale.

Climate Shock: The Economic Consequences of a Hotter Planet, by Gernot Wagner and Martin Weitzman

While this tome serves as a primer for the layperson to understand the causes of climate change, its impacts and what to do about it, its distinguishing feature is its emphasis on risk and uncertainty, two concepts essential for grasping the climate challenge. "Climate change is beset with deep-seated uncertainties on top of deep-seated uncertainties on top of still more deep-seated uncertainties," Wagner and Weitzman note. The solution? "In the end, it's risk management - existential risk management. And it comes with an ethical component. Precaution is a prudent stance when uncertainties about catastrophic risks are as dominant as they are here." This authorial pair explains - perhaps a bit earnestly, but cogently and accessibly - why you don't board a plane with a 10% chance of crashing and why you buy insurance against catastrophic losses. Such should be our collective response.

Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming, by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway

Perhaps a bit less gobsmacking in our deeply post-truth 2023 than it was at its release in the early Obama era, Oreskes and Conway's instant classic is the still-astonishing full narrative of American-style capitalism and politics run amok, resulting in corporate profits' repeated triumph over the commonweal. That emissions from fossil fuels would inexorably lead to global warming was well-known in the 1960s, yet a political-corporate-scientific complex arose, first for tobacco and later for climate change (not to mention opioids and hazardous chemicals), to obfuscate in Washington, D.C. and on the airwaves, sowing doubt and confusion and reaping inaction on grave societal threats whose sources were immensely profitable for the magnates of industry. While not limited in scope to climate change, this tome goes a long way towards explaining why America (and the world at large) have had so much trouble coming to grips with climate change and dithered for decades rather than take the necessary action to address an existential threat.

Parable of the Sower, by Octavia Butler

The brilliant science fiction and fantasy novelist Octavia Butler was well ahead of her time in tackling climate change. An interview with Butler revealed that she was deeply concerned with "look[ing] at global warming and the ways in which it's likely to change things for us... I imagined the United States becoming, slowly, through the combined effects of lack of foresight and short-term unenlightened self-interest, a third world country." At the same time, the moniker "climate lit" doesn't do this volume justice. The protagonist Lauren Olamina casts the injustice and suffering of an imagined America of the 2020s (then thirty years in the future) into sharp relief through her "hyperempathy syndrome", a 'disorder' that undermines the innate human predisposition towards callousness and self-preservation in the face of social inequity. Notable as an early examination of racial and gender intersectionality and environmental justice, *Parable of the Sower* is no less universal in plumbing the depths of society's fallenness and the potential for individual and collective redemption.

The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration, by Jake Bittle

All too often, the endless procession of natural disasters - hurricanes, wildfires, droughts - unfolds across TV screens as isolated instances of extreme weather but without the context of the longer-term, subtle and unseen consequences of gradually creeping climate change for individuals and communities affected by these events. Bittle, a staff writer for *Grist* on the climate beat, takes a chapter-by-chapter look at individual American communities on the front lines of climate change impacts and their denizens' struggle for stability, safety and economic well-being as local existence becomes ever more tenuous. Touring the country, he embeds himself in frontline communities in the Florida Keys (sea level rise), Houston (hurricanes), northern California (wildfire), Arizona (drought) and North Carolina (flooding), pulling back the curtain on how they are managing the economic, social and emotional fallout of physical displacement as well as deep and often repeated dislocation.

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